2005 Issue No. 12 — Rethinking Regionality

Regionality and New Media Art

By *Grayson Cooke* and *Dea Morgain*

This paper is a discussion of our work in new media art and photography since moving to the Wide Bay / Burnett region of South East Queensland - a "regional" area, and one significantly different from the urban environments both of us had inhabited up until our move. As well as outlining some of the issues facing new media art in regional areas, this paper describes our attempt to produce work that reflects our impressions of this region, that responds to and challenges notions of regionality, and that seeks to find a role for new media art in the regional context.

New Media Art and the Regions

As an art form, new media art faces various "barriers to entry" in regional areas, and before we discuss our own work, we would like to outline some of the issues that surround the position, and positioning, of new media art in the regions. Firstly, gallery patrons in regional areas often do not have the same kind of exposure to new media art that patrons in urban areas have, so new media art has a variable cultural capital depending on where it appears. In a certain sense, new media art lacks the more evident *value*, both economic and cultural, of traditional 2D art or representational sculpture. An oil painting is a discrete object, easily installed on a suitable wall, taken in with a glance, and its sale is a matter of the navigation of the museums, galleries and auction houses through which such art moves (Manovich 14). There is a well-established and functional market for traditional art. By comparison, works of new media art are confounding. As Lev Manovich states, they allow for "the existence of potentially numerous copies; infinitely many different states of the same work; author-user symbiosis … collaborative authorship; and network distribution" (14). This potential variability and iterability of the new media art work ensures that its valuation and sale is not a simple matter; to what can value adhere when the "work" can be displayed online to millions of viewers, distributed on digital media, or requires a complex setup of DVD-players, digital projectors and infra-red triggers to be considered "whole"?

Modes of reception differ also. Digital and multimedia works are often experiential, and temporal, requiring quite different "viewing" strategies of the gallery patron; indeed, even the concept of the "viewer" is limited in terms of the appreciation of new media art, where the viewer is simultaneously required to be a viewer, a listener, an audience, a user, and a participant. New media artworks refuse the dispassionate mode of aesthetic appreciation which demands little more of a viewer than two eyes and thirty seconds of their time. Instead, they often require the viewer to enter the artwork, to be willing to participate in it, or willing to sit for half an hour in front of it as it unfolds. The viewer must take up a position that is both inside and outside the work, and is thus presented with the spectacle of themselves as *part* of the work, which can be confronting to some. Moreover, the roles of viewer/user/listener/participant do not come naturally; these roles are learnt practices and strategies just like the appreciation of any other artform, and the lack of exposure to such works in regional areas means that their appreciation simply cannot be guaranteed.

Similarly, regional galleries, which are often funded by local councils, have the primary mandate of supporting local arts, which means that the predominant forms of 2D and 3D representational art get more showing than more experimental or new media forms. This is often a function, however, of the quite particular funding and infrastructural requirements of new media art; digital and multimedia works often require computer equipment, laptops, digital projectors, stereo speakers, and complicated lighting and wiring setups, and there is no guarantee that regional galleries are either equipped to install this kind of equipment, or funded to purchase and install it in the first place.

This is a situation that is gradually changing, but there can be no denying the urban bias in the distribution of funding for new media art activities, and the coalescence of funding in the more populous and urbanized states. For the 2003-04 grants round, Queensland applicants for the Australian Council's New Media Arts Grants received less than a quarter of the grants awarded to applicants in New South Wales. Applicants in the Northern Territory received one-*eighteenth* of the grants awarded to NSW applicants (Australia Council, "2003-2004" 76-77). Obviously, this is in part a function of the greater population density of urban areas, especially Sydney and Melbourne, where more applicants equals more grants awarded. And, we must note that the Australia Council has named regional areas as one of its current priorities for further development and support (Australia Council "Arts in Regional Australia"). Nevertheless, certain disparities remain, and are a perhaps inevitable function of the populational, socio-economic and cultural differences between urban and regional areas.

On the other hand, many new media artworks are photo-based and screen-based, which does make them accessible to a wide range of people. Unless they are abstract, the photographic and video image have always had a stronger indexical relation to the real than some other forms of 2D representation, and are often valued for precisely the reason that their comprehension, at least on a simple level or at face value, requires no complex act of translation. While we can argue that new media art *as such* has a low profile in regional areas, new media themselves have a much higher profile. Home computing, CD-ROMs, the internet, broadband infrastructure and DVD have ensured that many people are exposed to screen culture, digital imagery and the idea of the interactive interface, and this is as true in regional areas as it is in urban areas. Moreover, the use of new media, and familiarity with interactive interfaces, is also subject to generational differences. Younger generations tend to approach interactive works with a great deal more confidence than do older generations. This was certainly the case with the exhibition of *Desert | Island*, the first project we discuss below. On the opening night, we observed a wide gamut of competencies in the "users" of the project, from ten-year-olds who jumped in without hesitation and began wildly clicking to "figure it out", to pensioners scared that a click in the wrong place might "break" it, or that they might not be "doing it right".

So, while new media art can be something of a hard-sell in regional areas, it is not the case that there is no space in which it can develop, nor is it the case that there is no audience prepared for it. And, it has been our experience that regional galleries, and other organisations such as museums, tourist attractions and art competitions, are keen to showcase digital and multimedia works. While the *value* of new media art in the regions may still be in negotiation, there is nevertheless a *desire* for new media art which goes beyond the more quotidian desire for digital imagery and televisual entertainment.

Interactive Art: Desert | Island

[view a greatly reduced, web-
ready version of the project
(requires Flash Player v.7.0)

Desert | Island was produced in 2004 at the request of the local art gallery who were looking for an interactive project. At this point, we had lived here for only twelve months. Being new to the area,

we were still very much in awe of the beauty of coastal South East Queensland. Acres of empty golden beaches, pandanus palms and she-oaks hugging the shores, and cane fields stretching into the distance. This is an area of great natural beauty, and our first desires, as artists, were to express our appreciation of this beauty.

At the same time, having moved here after living in various cities in Australia and overseas, we couldn't help but wish to express our frustration with certain elements of Bundaberg culture, which could be put down to its size and regional focus. Bundaberg is a small regional centre. Tourism, rum and sugar tie Bundaberg in to various globalised industries, but the predominance of the agricultural industry here ensures that Bundaberg is, in large part, concerned with itself and its immediate surroundings. Life is lived from season to season, and is concerned with locale; cycles of planting and harvesting are everpresent, from the profusion of watermelons that flood the region in early summer, to the cane trains, cane fires and harvesting trucks during the sugar "crush" season. Moreover, this is a place where married couples travel a mere 100km north to the towns of Agnes Water and 1770 for their honeymoons, and families spend their Christmas holidays at Bargara Beach , 15km from Bundaberg.

Despite this concern with locale, however, common fantasies of tropical life and the "tropical island" continue to revolve around the "elsewhere" of places like Fiji and Samoa, regardless that this area is sub-tropical, and appears, to us at least, very much to typify aspects of a "tropical fantasy". The fantasised tropical is always an elsewhere, always some place that one is *not*. With *Desert | Island*, then, we wanted to inject our impressions of Bundaberg and South East Queensland with a palpable sense of the fantasy of tropical life. We wanted to both present, and critique, this fantasy of tropicality; to both inject our representation of this region with the connotations of the fantasy, but also to reinforce the idea *of* the fantasy, with all its kitsch value intact. Hence, the more naturalistic video segments of the project are countered by photographic and musical elements that foreground their status as part of "kitsch" culture.

We were also experimenting with the possibilities of consumer-grade digital cameras, and their ability to record what is commonly known as video; this was another kind of "regionalism", attempting to work with a "centralized" technology in a "marginal" way. Video production, and much video art, has tended towards the monolithic, televisual approach which requires expensive equipment and extensive pre- and post-production facilities, not to mention time. This is a generalisation of course; Nam June Paik and Pipilotti Rist, to name just two of the most well-known, have always worked to divorce video from being rooted in broadcast media. Nevertheless, video in its commercial and consumer application tends towards the televisual. Video, and now digital video, is the *lingua franca* of the television industry, and home DV cameras are marketed in the name of the family archive, tied into the proliferation of technologies such as mobile phones, portable MP3 players, and digital cameras, all of which resource the convergent "digital life" (Robins and Webster 251). Similarly, the use of video on the Web, and indeed the constitution of what such a thing as "video on the Web" might mean, has concentrated on streaming video, which again conforms to the broadcast model. Rather than conforming to the perceived dominance of this broadcast/televisual model of video, we wanted to use video in a much more particulated and unconventional manner. In its context as one of the various media forms that constitute part of a convergent "digital life", digital video is just another digital "object" amongst others. Video need hold no special place as some inviolable media form; it's just data, pure and simple.

Our approach was to use the tiny video "objects" captured by a cheap digital camera, which are only 160x120 pixels as opposed to the 720x576 of broadcast video, as elements in an interactive project. In Macromedia Flash, we created a 5x5 grid into which to place the video objects, each of which consisted of 10 to 20 seconds of silent footage of aspects of the local environment. Clicking on the video objects firstly started the videos, with subsequent clicks cycling each video object through a series of stages, including text, audio and part of a photographic jigsaw. This enabled us to introduce simultaneity and interactivity into the presentation of video, two key experiences

that the broadcast model of video rarely touches upon (although Digital TV is beginning to make moves in this direction). In a similar manner to the "writerly video" of Adrian Miles, who uses Quicktime and DV to produce video blogs or vogs, we produced a video project which had interactivity, experience and openness, and which refused the "reinvention of television" (Miles).

Photography: Rodeo, Bundy Show and Cane Fire photos

[view sample photos of the projects]

<div align="right">

Rodeo
Bundy Show
Cane Fire

</div>

These photographs have been taken over the past couple of years, and are part of our ongoing practice of observing, participating in, and valuing local celebrations and cultural events. Every environment in which it is possible to live, will always be a rich source of imagery. Wherever we have lived, both of us have always used photography to appreciate and come to grips with our environment, to tease out its beauty and its strangeness. Although our photographic practice was primarily urban before we moved here, concentrating on architectural, textural, social and personal aspects of urban environments, it was always based on the exigencies of place. Thus, while the move here has resulted in the emergence of quite a different visual aesthetic for both of us, the pulsion behind the practice remains the same.

Whether photography leads to, or is undertaken in the name of an *understanding* of the environment or cultural events, however, is another issue, and in many ways is irrelevant to our photographic practice. What do Deleuze & Guattari say? "No signifier, never interpret!"(Deleuze and Guattari 159). The Christian rodeo that broadcasts evangelical messages inbetween bouts of rough riding, the carnivalesque rural show with its 1st Prize sponge cakes and Blue Ribbon giant pumpkins; these events have an intrinsic energy and *raison d'être*, they are spectacles, regardless of any moment of interpretation or contextualisation. Indeed, if there is any theme that ties together our photographs of local events, it would be an attempt to represent the process of the creation of spectacle. Thus, while these photos do represent a certain process of documenting local events, and our movements through and around them, in no way do we conceive of these photos as a documentary of "the regions" as such, nor do we wish to place ourselves outside the frame or framing of these events. We live here, we are not just observers, we are participants, and we participate in the various "real" economies of the region, not just in the more cynical and symbolic economy of "things to make art about". We are not interested in art as tourism, nor in art as investment in the cultural currency of the cutting edge; rather, we continue to be interested in art as a process of living, part of the im-pression and ex-pression of moving through the world.

Installation Art: Still Burning Mountain

[view a greatly reduced, web-ready version of the project]

As we have lived here longer, our ways of seeing what surrounds us have broadened, and we have a greater interest in the history of this region and how these forms of inscribed knowledge work. South East and Central Queensland are the areas from which the sugar cane industry in Australia sprang. Very specific race and labour relations mark that history; the theft of land and of life from the Aboriginal inhabitants, and the use of "Kanaka" South Sea Islander labour on the cane fields in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Indeed, this area, and the area to the north of here, has been referred to as a "badland", a place of ill-repute, still too mired in the ghost of violence past (Gibson 20). Like much of Australia , and like the imaginary Australia that exists in the minds of all its inhabitants, this area has its own ghosts to grapple with, its memories of tougher times.

One important area for enquiry relates to the Murri history of this place, and the lack of public acknowledgement of this history. Murri history is not necessarily "written" in the Western sense of "written history", although it is no less "inscribed" in people and in place. In the tension, or *abyme* between these two modes of writing, things often disappear, sometimes reappearing in other guises, under other names, and sometimes never to be seen again.

The area in which we live was once volcanic. The beaches and shores here, known as the Woongarra Marine Park, are lined with volcanic rock; the borders of cane farms towards the coast are lined with "Kanaka walls", walls built out of the volcanic rock that Kanaka labourers were forced to dig out of the fields before the cane growers could use the land. This area is also extremely flat, with a single hill rising out of the plains that slope towards the sea. This hill is currently known as "The Hummock", yet it is this "Hummock" that gave its name to the coastal stretch beneath it, Woongarra translating roughly as "burning mountain". What interested us about this, was the idea that the name Woongarra records a reality that is long gone, but must once have been the present of some *one,*or some many. A name is a kind of archive, and implies the installation of law, as Derrida notes in *Archive Fever*, for it is through naming that places are defined, given significance, and thus enter history (Derrida 1). What does this name, Woongarra, record, and what does its substitution by The Hummock elide? What temporalities have these names presided over, and what histories have unfolded around them?

Our audiovisual installation *Still Burning Mountain* consists of two projector screens and a soundtrack. On each screen, a series of close-up photographs of fragments of stone, coral, seed, bone and rock collected from the local area slowly unfolds. The soundtrack contains environmental sounds of birds, crickets, frogs and storms, also recorded locally. The sounds and images are the white noise of South East Queensland, the backdrop upon which histories, in all their grandeur, beauty and brutality, are built. Accordingly, *Still Burning Mountain* is immersive and reflective, designed for contemplation and experience over time. It is not interactive, but its appreciation requires an investment of time, and an openness to an extended temporality. In this experience of slowness, *Still Burning Mountain* is an attempt to invoke a temporality in which the mountain still burns, a temporality no longer reflected in its contemporary name, but still echoing in the fragments that fall so easily underfoot.

Regional life enables an art practice that is full of space and time, free of the noise and clutter of urban environments, and we wanted *Still Burning Mountain* to be expressive of that space for contemplation. Indeed, we have found the experience of being artists here a positive one. Bundaberg has been very welcoming, in terms of employment, friendship, and community. With all of that, having lived here only a short time we can't deny that we remain "outsiders", and that that is the position we continue to work from — our position here is one of ongoing negotiation, and our art practice is dependent on this tension for communication and reflection.

With digital networks, email and the internet, the distances involved in "being regional" are less of an issue; technology both enables the collapsing of the regional/urban divide, through telecommunications infrastructure and the convergent digital life, and maintains it, through the strangeness of new media expression. Of course, there are regions within regionality, and distance and telecommunications infrastructure are two of the testing grounds for whatever might be considered "regional" at any one time. The conference at which this paper was first presented discussed the idea that "the Bush", as an Australian mythos, is a kind of imaginary space that changes depending on circumstance and economic and political need; one constitutes oneself as "the Bush" when one needs to define oneself as an outside, but then, one can just as easily turn around and define somewhere else as the Bush, somewhere more remote, more "regional". Like tropical fantasies and desert islands, regionality is something that disappears as it appears, in some way always able to be reconstituted elsewhere when the need arises. And, regionality is just as much a state of mind as any "real" space. Marginality often occurs at the very heart of what is considered central, and this has always been the case. It's always possible to be alone in a crowd, or to find oneself surrounded in the Bush. With this variability of regionality in mind, we would

argue that to be new media art practitioners in a regional area is to be always inbetween; inbetween one space and another, in an imaginary and a real at the same time.

Dea Morgain and Grayson Cooke are new-media artists and photographers based in South-East Queensland. Dea has undertaken a Media Arts degree at Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology majoring in photography, and has worked as a commercial and exhibiting photographer. Dea has also held the position of senior officer for a number of large non-profit agencies, including arts agencies, and has managed numerous multimedia projects and arts education programs. Grayson holds an interdisciplinary PhD from Concordia University in Montreal, and is employed as a lecturer in Multimedia at CQU Bundaberg Campus. He has exhibited works of interactive art and photography in Australia, New Zealand and Canada.
g.cooke@cqu.edu.au

Works Cited

Australia Council. "2003-2004: Australia Council Grants Lists since 1995." 1 July 2005 <www.ozco.gov.au/arts_resources/other/australia_council_grants_lists_since_1995/>

Australia Council. "Arts in Regional Australia." 1 July 2005 <www.ozco.gov.au/council_priorities/regional/>

Deleuze, Gilles, and Guattari, Felix. *A Thousand Plateaus*. Trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1987.

Derrida, Jacques. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. Trans. Eric Prenowitz. Chicago : Chicago University Press, 1995.

Gibson, Ross. *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland*. St Lucia: Queensland University Press, 2002.

Manovich, Lev. "New Media from Borges to HTML." *The New Media Reader*. Ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Nick Montfort. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2003. pp.13-25.

Miles, Adrian . "Videoblog::vog 2.0." 30 June 2005 <hypertext.rmit.edu.au/vog/>

Robins, Kevin and Webster, Frank. "Prospects of a Virtual Culture." *Science as Culture* 11.2 (2002): 235-256.